

GODFATHERS



GODFATHERS
LIVES AND CRIMES
OF THE MAFIA MOBSTERS



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GODFATHERS



A Single Entity?

Leonardo was no saint. Not even as a boy, when he still used to go home every day for lunch to his mother's. He didn't remember much about his late father, Francesco Paolo – just enough to feel his absence. Luckily there was his uncle Titta – luckily, thought Leonardo, because his uncle was strong, everyone respected him, he never needed to say much when he gave his orders. Sometimes he didn't need to say anything at all.

In the poverty-stricken, dust-ridden Sicily of 1958, Leonardo was seventeen years old and felt sure his uncle was watching him. Nothing in particular occurred – they met each other on the normal family occasions, and his uncle didn't say anything or look at him more than usual. Yet he was observing his nephew and Leonardo wanted to be observed. It was important not to try to be observed – the best way was to copy his uncle down to the last detail. Doing rather than saying. It wasn't too difficult – a few words, a few gestures. He needed to give an impression of steadiness, solidity, reliability – that was enough for his uncle to understand.

His uncle eventually approached him with a request. Leonardo remained serious, not reacting, just as his uncle was expecting. He was of school age, he could have been studying for a diploma. But when he told his mother he was going to leave school and get a job, uncle Titta just nodded and nothing more was said about the matter.

What does an uncle ask his seventeen-year-old nephew? What can you ask a boy of seventeen? “Are you up to killing a horse?” his uncle asked him. Yes, Leonardo was up to it. A horse – an animal, even one which was large, strong, noble, glossy and groomed – it had to die because that’s what his uncle wanted.

An older man accompanied Leonardo on the job. Perhaps he was only two or three years older, but to the boy he seemed like an adult. The man was introduced to him as L.C. Emanuele. They went off to take up their positions near the farm where the horse was going to meet its fate. For a few days the two of them waited, hidden and silent, in the warm shadows. The horse came out, went in again, came out – the right moment to kill it never arrived. Uncle Titta sent a message. They could come back. Leonardo had meant what he’d said – he was obviously ready to kill the horse. With that clear, there was no actual need to shoot the poor beast.

His uncle asked him: “Could you kill a man?” The boy once more said: “Yes.” He was sent off to observe the habits and behaviour of the intended victim for a couple of weeks. In the mean time someone stole a rifle for him from a well-known gun shop in Palermo. L.C. Emanuele, who’d kept an eye on him before, came to tell him his uncle wanted to see him.

When Leonardo got to the appointment, there was another man in the room who just watched him and said nothing. His uncle introduced him as Totò L., and gave no further details. They handed him the gun, some overalls and a pair of sunglasses. “F. Giuseppe is coming – you’ll be going with him.” The new man was to be the driver. Leonardo was to shoot. It was uncle Titta who had taken him on his first hunting trip, using his father’s rifle, to make sure the boy learnt how to handle firearms. The driver arrived in a battered purple Fiat Topolino, which looked as if it had been left out in the sun too long or was just dirty, with a grimy dirt that turned it black. But it was perfect – it belonged to a certain widow only the driver knew. Leonardo and the driver stuck a new number plate on the car and drove off.

Perhaps Leonardo was expecting something a bit better than a rackety Topolino for his first mission. But he quickly realized

what an effective and essential tool it was. In 1958, Sicily was still a poor country – no one would give a second glance at such a car. It also had a roof you could open, a touch of luxury in a vehicle designed for the have-nots who couldn't afford the real thing.

As soon as he saw his victim, Leonardo stood up through the open roof. The first shot didn't go off. Despite the gun catching, he remained steady and calm and pressed the trigger again; the target dropped to the pavement in a puddle of blood before he could realize what was happening in the purple Topolino. The driver sped away and Leonardo closed the roof. He started to dismantle the rifle and put it in a plastic bag. His uncle took him on a lark-hunting trip as a reward. Shortly afterwards he was initiated as a "man of honour". He was eighteen years old.

From then on he shot and killed every time he was asked to by the man who had been his uncle but was now his "father and godfather", the head of his new "Family". For the next fifteen years, whenever there was some shooting, some burning, some beating-up to do, Leonardo was ready to do it.

Shortly before his thirty-third birthday, on 30th March 1973, he gave himself up to the police. No one realized he was a Mafia killer. He ended up in prison and then in confinement in Sardinia. It occurred to him he might pray. After a few days he realized that it gave him some relief, so he started to spend a lot of time in prayer.

Leonardo was no saint and he was no longer a boy. He was a hardened and ruthless criminal. He took pleasure in killing. No one in the police or the *carabinieri* could have dreamt he would start to talk. But he had turned up at the police station and started to tell everything he knew, for no apparent reason. It was hard to believe he'd been struck by a religious thunderbolt – and harder to believe the more he talked. Yet some kind of motive needed to be found for his extraordinary confession, so the police officials decided to add these words to his statement, at the head of the torrent of accusations which followed: "On reflection and wishing once and for all to unburden my conscience which has tormented me now for some time, for crimes which I committed by myself or with others, as well as

for those I knew about as a member of a Mafia organization, I give an account of my sins which I wish to expiate”.

They sent him off to a cell, not realizing how essential it was to protect him. The entire underworld knew the traitor was talking. A rumour started to circulate that he was a coprophage. He was a murderer and a religious fanatic, and he also liked to eat shit. These rumours reached the police headquarters: they thought it might be the other inmates who wanted to give an idea of how low Leonardo had sunk – or perhaps not, perhaps there was someone who really knew what Leonardo liked and didn't like to do.

Leonardo talked about the Mafia and described it as a single entity, made up of Families who knew each other, competing with each other to share out business and territory, but remaining united and controlled, ruled by a precise internal hierarchy, interrelated and in contact with Mafia Families in the United States.

After Leonardo's lark-hunting trip, the group that assembled was the Altarello Family, of which uncle Titta was the godfather, the head, the master. He was everything. Totò L. reappeared at the meeting, together with a dozen other men. They drew lots to decide who would be Leonardo's godfather during his apprenticeship: Ciro C., whom Leonardo hardly knew, was chosen. They pricked Leonardo's finger with a thorn from an orange tree, burned a sacred image of St Rosalia and made him swear the sacred oath of the Beati Paoli.¹ As the picture of the saint burned to ashes in his hands he swore he would die rather than betray his new Family. Finally all the men who were there kissed him on the mouth. “But they didn't use their tongues,” he was at pains to point out to the police officers, so they could write it down in the statement.

This was Leonardo's initiation. He was placed under a new guardianship, just like a minor who's removed by his uncle from an orphanage and begins a new life. He didn't get a new

1 The name of a secret society thought to have existed in medieval Sicily, allegedly formed to oppose both the Church and the State. It is suggested by some modern sources that the Beati Paoli sect was a predecessor of what today is known as the Sicilian Mafia.

father: his uncle didn't want sons and had no intention of educating him to become a free and independent man. He was quick to grasp the intimate, murky, magnetic nature of the mixture of blood, Mafia and dependence which bound him to his godfather – like some anaesthetic from which he would never awaken and emerge.

From the respect which other young men showed him, he realized that in his new Family any career path was open to him so long as he continued to carry out crimes. His apprenticeship didn't have an escape clause. His independence wasn't even a consideration. Perhaps it might come about if he had the luck to survive the wiping out of his entire Family in some Mafia turf war. Or if he turned traitor, gave himself up to the authorities and was branded as an outcast.

In recounting his frenetic criminal career it almost seemed as if Leonardo remembered the cars better than his victims: the Fiat 1100 torched in Via Perpignano near the Boccadifalco airport belonged to a man who was building the new main post office. The elegant Lancia, on the other hand, had been stolen from Costanzo, the building tycoon and father of a well-known dynasty of property speculators. Leonardo liked to watch them burn.

Building was going on all over Palermo. Business was booming, capital was plentiful, suddenly emerging out of nowhere. Leonardo's uncle-godfather was keen to get in on the sector: the boy was his right-hand man, he admired him like his own father and did to the letter whatever he was asked to do.

A certain Salvatore C. was doing quite well in his market-garden business. In order to get water he had to pay a contribution to the Altarello Family, a proportion of the bill issued by the water company. That's how the territory had been divided up. When the contributions stopped coming, it was Leonardo's job to target his nice bright-red Fiat 1100 family saloon. The burnt-out carcass of the car was left in Via Palchetto for quite a time, as a warning to others.

During a meeting of the Family, when Leonardo was twenty-eight, a certain B. Giuseppe suddenly slapped uncle Titta in

the face. The truth of the matter was that when B. Giuseppe had been to collect the contributions the owner of the bright-red Fiat 1100 had to pay for his water supply, he had failed to hand them over to the head of the clan as he was supposed to. But instead of raising this issue, the godfather accused him of being a spy. A spy: he was a marked man. Slapping Titta in the face was simply his way of signing his own death warrant. "We'll deal with it," was all his uncle said when he left the meeting. He then let time take its course – a lot of time.

Leonardo had his own car, a Mini Minor which sped through Palermo's traffic lights and which he liked to think made him the envy of his peers. When the moment finally arrived, he left it parked a couple of blocks away from where B. Giuseppe lived and went to take up his position behind a low wall. He had already examined the spot in detail and, in order not to be visible, had gone back day after day to assemble boulders on the wall. He fired a single shot with the same gun he had used for his first murder. B. Giuseppe was hit in the neck and took a few seconds to die. Then, back in the Mini Minor, Leonardo dismantled the gun, put it in a plastic bag and threw it over a wall into the garden of a villa belonging to a lawyer, as his instructions said he should.

Another time he and three others had climbed inside a light-green Fiat 600 to beat up the owner of a bar. But the driver didn't take to being beaten up, and put up a violent fight – they had no choice but to shoot him and drive off, all four of them inside, in the green Fiat.

On another occasion he poisoned all the dogs belonging to a property speculator with strychnine. It was the time of the so-called "sack of Palermo", when huge amounts of money could be made putting up public and private buildings. His godfather uncle Titta didn't want any competitors in certain contracts, so Leonardo was given a small bag of the poison and carried out his orders.

Leonardo's deposition lasted for hours: one crime after another, he seemed to recall them all. He liked going to the cinema. "Just like everyone, no? Doesn't everyone like going to the cinema?" The police officer didn't reply. He just changed

the paper and the carbon sheet in the typewriter. Yes, everyone likes going to the cinema – but only Leonardo got in free. The box-office staff and the usherettes didn't charge him anything at the cinema Imperia. They were “friends of friends”, and when they asked for a favour he couldn't turn them down. He agreed to set fire to the manager's brand-new blue Fiat 500 – it seemed his staff found him a bit too gruff and severe.

The Mafia, as Leonardo talked about it, was into everything – petty transactions and multi-million-pound businesses – and it knew everyone, doctors, surgeons, psychiatrists, engineers, civil servants, clerks, cashiers, shop assistants, street-cleaners, nurses, barmen, bakers, grocers, butchers. It was in truth a single entity, and Leonardo had learnt how to move through it with ease.

He listed the Families he knew and the connections between them. He spoke about high-level meetings between the different bosses to reach agreements. He mentioned a certain Totò Riina, one of the leading godfathers, who had managed to solve a dispute between two Families. The firm P. was about to start on a construction project; the Mafia bosses had fixed the sum the firm needed to pay in order to go ahead. Uncle Titta at the head of his Family was in charge of the area round Altarello. Based on the territorial divisions, he should have been responsible for receiving the money. But the Noce Family, in a neighbouring territory, were quick to claim they had the right to it. All Totò Riina needed to say was “The Noce Family is close to my heart” and the dispute was over. Somewhat later Titta sent his nephew to see Pippo Calò, the head of the Noce clan, to let him know they accepted Riina's decision but still thought it might be fair to give something to the Altarells. Uncle Titta didn't actually expect them to agree. He was just complying with the way things are done under the *pax mafiosa* – giving a signal of friendship and of submission to the rules.

The criminal police handed the long statement as signed by Leonardo over to the judiciary. Leonardo was now an official *pentito* who had agreed to turn State's evidence by telling the authorities what he knew about the Mafia. He was the

first of his kind in Italy and, all in all, he'd had more to say than Joe Valachi, whose confessions had been broadcast live on television in the United States. Valachi had been a mere *picciotto*, or foot soldier, in Vito Genovese's clan and spoke only because he was scared of being killed.

Leonardo didn't even know why he was talking. He had broken his oath of loyalty – he knew this very well as he prayed in his cell. The Altarello clan wouldn't stand by and watch – and nor would the other Families. When he came to trial, the judges refused to believe the testimony of this murderer and coprophage. Leonardo's account of the Mafia as a single entity, like some vast fungal growth stretching underneath the society visible on the surface, seemed incredible in the light of the sun which dazzled Sicily in the 1970s.

At the end of the trial, Leonardo was condemned to twenty-five years. When the case went to appeal, the judges decided he was mad and treated him accordingly by sentencing him to a psychiatric prison unit. No further statements were written on the evidence he had provided. He was handed over to the psychiatrists and the staff of the asylum. A heavy iron door clanged shut on all the stories which the madman could tell.

Totò Riina summoned several other bosses to a meeting in Corleone. They didn't give Leonardo's case a second thought. No one said a single thing about it to uncle Titta. There was no point.

Corleone DOC

When they hear the name Corleone, most people think of the Mafia. It doesn't matter much whether the association of ideas comes from the gang based in Corleone, headed by Liggio and Riina, or from the character of Don Vito Corleone, invented by Mario Puzo and played by Marlon Brando in Coppola's film *The Godfather*. The name of Corleone is so famous throughout the world that in 2000 the local councillors thought of using it as a brand name. Why not try to put its negative connotations into reverse and use it to advertise the pasta, jams or cheeses

made by honest local producers? In time they might even be contenders on a European scale against other renowned centres for agricultural produce such as Castelnaudary in France.

In novels and films you often see the most violent crimes taking place in restaurants, so making a link between criminals and good cooking. For both crime and food, nothing but the best, just as the godfathers like it. And it's not just a myth: various investigative reports, biographies and eyewitness accounts make it clear that mafiosi like to eat well and that good cooking is part of their tradition.

And it's true that the brand name Corleone on food and drink products would lead potential buyers to expect high quality. Only a process of rather more lateral thinking – linking the Mafia to environmental pollution, with illegal dumping and the trade in toxic waste – might tarnish the image. So it's a good idea then? Cheeses, wines, oils and preserves trade-marked Corleone? With a DOC attached and helped along by the cynicism of global trade, the area's hardworking local producers might make their fortunes. It might even break the automatic association in most people's minds of the name "Corleone" with the word "Mafia".

Who would ever associate the name of Corleone with one of the most significant events in Italian history? It would be necessary to show how and why the event was so important. July 1893: the Corleone Treaty.² September 1893: Corleone again, where the first great strike in the Italian countryside took place, the movement known as the "Fasci Siciliani's" finest hour. It takes some effort to realize the importance of this. It's possible that the "Fasci Siciliani" don't even merit a mention in the history curriculum as taught in Italian schools. Perhaps an hour during the school year is devoted to the subject, perhaps one of the teachers suggests it as a project. For most people "Fasci" can only mean "Fascist". In Italian schools the students ask you: "But they really had nothing to do with the Fascists? But if they were progressives why are they called 'Fasci'?"

² The Corleone Treaty ("Patti Agrari"), signed on 30th July 1893, is the first example of a workers' union contract in Italy.

1893

The great strikes of farm labourers in Corleone in 1893 are not part of history as it is taught in our schools, nor are they included among the symbolic events which crystallize national self-awareness. Only a few academics and professional historians are interested in the Fasci Siciliani. We need to look again at the dates we choose in constructing our narrative of historical events, and highlight the ones which are most important for the development we want to trace. Mass participation was the key element of the Sicilian Fasci.

In late-nineteenth-century Italy a right and left wing took turns in power, in a struggle to win the votes of a very restricted electorate. The franchise was given only to men who had an income large enough to make them eligible not only for tax, but also for participating in the political machinations of the new nation. The Left, as led by Giolitti, had already abandoned Sicily to its destiny, both as an emotional commitment and as a political decision. Swarming with brigands, resistant to being run by the representatives of the Italian State, the island was only of concern to them as a potential reservoir of votes. The ability to carry out realistic and effective analyses of the political situation has always been part of Cosa Nostra's genetic inheritance.

Another event occurred in 1893 which, unlike the Fasci, has managed to get into the history books: the congress in Reggio Emilia, when the Italian Socialist Party emerged from the Workers' Party. It was born with a congenital defect, hardly noticeable at the time, but destined to have an ever-increasing influence on the fate of the Italian Left over the course of the next century. The new party rejected the popular uprising of the Sicilian Fasci. In thrall to its own ideology, which placed the working class at the centre of the system, it wouldn't or couldn't understand mass movements which emerged spontaneously from below. And despite the presence of many Sicilian Socialists among the leaders of the Fasci, the new party almost wanted the popular uprising to fail.

This political weakness left the way free for the Mafia, which knows how to play the political game. They understood the

Fasci very well and saw in them an opportunity to consolidate their own prestige and power over the mass of Sicilians who were involved in the movement. The left wing in government, on the other hand, abandoned Sicily, its labourers, peasants, artisans, miners, tradesmen, share-croppers, the small – very small – landowners to their fate, just as it abandoned the turbulent mass of intellectuals, anarchists, diehard Mazzinians, ex-Garibaldini and even some Socialists.

Some of the most astute political minds of the period were to be found in the Fasci but, for the Left, there was no trace of that abstract Socialist ideology which they were intent on carrying into action. All they could see was a group of coarse labourers from the deep South in search of land they could farm, men who had no interest in finding more modern types of work, but were content to stay stooped over their hoes in rough farm labour, masses who were inspired by some vague undefined need for democracy, and not by socialist ideals.

The strikes in Sicily were distant events for the leaders of the Italian Left. The Giolitti government turned a blind eye to the organization of the Fasci in rural areas simply because the political price for such negligence was not too high. As for the Right, the Fasci were rejected out of hand – the very idea of a political alliance with a popular movement was unthinkable. The concept of the Right guiding the masses, including the poorest levels of society, was still unformed. Although Crispi was Sicilian himself, as far as he and the other conservative leaders were concerned, all that was needed was enough power to eradicate the movement, by sending the army to shoot the rebels who were protesting against customs duties, taxes and the estate system.

So the Fasci and their leaders were left isolated in a Sicily outside the Italian State, an island which for centuries had been ruled by foreign powers, which survived without any government to whose authority it could appeal, a place where a different mode of being or culture had grown up, an underground form of communication, a hidden and alternative system of power. Italy's government, monarchy, political parties were all so many foreigners in the eyes of the labourers who supported the Fasci and dreamt of land and freedom, food and democracy – or,